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van Eck, C.W.

DOI
10.25609/sure.v1.1039
Publication date
2015
Document Version
Final published version
Published in
Student Undergraduate Research e-Journal

Link to publication

Citation for published version (APA):
van Eck, C. W. (2015). Audiences at the Heart of the IPCC: Exploratory Research Into the IPCC's Communications. *Student Undergraduate Research e-Journal*, *1*. https://doi.org/10.25609/sure.v1.1039

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Download date:10 Feb 2025

Audiences at the Heart of the IPCC

Exploratory Research into the IPCC's Communications

Christel van Eck
Climate Outreach & Information Network
Windesheim University of Applied Sciences
Contact: christelvaneck@live.nl

ABSTRACT

In 2010, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change adopted a formal strategy to make its communications available and accessible for audiences beyond its primary audience of governments and policymakers. By means of interviews with prominent climate change communicators in the United Kingdom, the needs of its secondary audiences (e.g., NGOs, journalists, general public) are explored with reference to core elements of every communication process. The results show that the IPCC currently applies an outdated model of science communication. There is room for improvement. The present research produced 11 recommendations for the IPCC to communicate more effectively to its multiple audiences.

Keywords
IPCC, climate change, audience appropriate communication, science communication

INTRODUCTION

In 1998, the World Meteorological Organization and United Nations Environment Program established the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC). Every six or seven years, the IPCC releases assessment reports based on the available scientific information of all aspects of climate change. The IPCC has faced many intense communication challenges over the years, for example on how it communicates uncertainties and deals with scandals like the climategate affair.

In 2010, on the advice of the InterAcademy Council, it adopted a formal communications strategy[1]. In this strategy, the IPCC acknowledges that, apart from its primary audience of governments and policymakers at all levels, the IPCC has other audiences to which it wants to make information "available and accessible". One of its governing principles is that the IPCC's approach and activities need to be audience-appropriate in order to communicate effectively. Nevertheless, it remains unknown what audience-appropriate information looks like for the IPCC's secondary audiences.

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THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Climate change researchers and communication specialists are becoming increasingly interested in audience-oriented communication, rather than taking a 'one size fits all' approach. Earlier it was assumed that more or 'better' science would eliminate factors that constitute barriers to appropriate behaviour responses[2]. However, Kahan et al[3] found that those members of the public with the highest degree of scientific literacy and technical reasoning capacity were the ones who were most culturally polarized rather than being most concerned about climate change. Moser & Dilling[4] contend that communicators should not underestimate the decision-making power or the influence that audiences have over an intended outreach goal of a communication effort. However, in practice many communicators tend to rush identifying who their audience is as they are solely concerned with the message or information they want to convey.

Moser[5] has identified core elements of a communication process to gain a fuller understanding of the challenges and opportunities for the effective communication of climate change, which served as the basis of the research. Moser stresses how important it is to recognize the interdependence of these various elements in order to be effective. Moreover, one needs to understand that any attempt to communicate is always embedded in a context which also influences its outcome.

The theoretical assumptions that underlie this research were:

1. Communicators reach their audiences more effectively if their audiences' information needs are their first concern.

2. Core elements of any communication process are: (1) the purpose and scope of the communication; (2) the audience; (3) the framing; (4) the messages; (5) the messengers; (6) the modes and channels of communication; and (7) the outcomes of communication – assessing effectiveness.

3. All of these elements are affected by contextual factors that compete for attention, put up obstacles to engagement or else make it easier for people to act on the information they receive[3].

PROBLEM DEFINITION

In order to explore what audience-appropriate information constitutes for the IPCC's secondary

audiences, the main question addressed by the research was: What are the IPCC's secondary audiences' information needs with regard to the IPCC's communications, on the basis of Moser's core elements of a communication process, considering relevant contextual influences? The following two sub-questions were formulated to guide the research:

- What are the secondary audiences' information needs with regard to the IPCC's communications, on the basis of Moser's core elements of a communication process?
- What do the IPCC's secondary audiences regard as relevant contextual factors that have an influence on the design of its communications?

METHODOLOGY

Due to the fact that the IPCC's secondary audiences' needs were unknown, the research was exploratory in its nature. Exploratory research demanded a qualitative approach; because qualitative research allows the researcher to formulate the research directions throughout the process depending on the findings[6]. As the research progressed, an increasingly better and deeper knowledge and understanding of the objects of reasoning and recognition of emerging patterns came to light, which validated the use of semi-structured interviews.

By means of a purposive sampling design, 16 semi-structured interviews were conducted with experts who either work for an NGO that is UK-based and active in the field of climate change or have extensive experience in or with climate change journalism. These 16 prominent communicators in the climate change scene (e.g. WWF and BBC) have first-hand experience of bridging the gap between the IPCC and its multiple audiences.

The topic lists of the interviews adopted Lazarfeld's[7] three principles of specification, division, and tacit assumption. The questions were three times pre-tested, but adapted throughout the process if necessary due to the exploratory character of the research. On the basis of questions informed by Moser's core elements, the interviewees articulated very clear information needs with respect to a communication process and in addition pointed to several contextual factors the IPCC needs to consider in the design of its communications. Upon data collection, the interviews were transcribed and coded as part of the analysis.

RESULTS

The main purpose and scope of IPCC's communication is considered as useful, but questioned to be met. Widening the scope of its communications to secondary audiences, by making information available and accessible, is assessed differently among the interviewees. The interviewees agree that someone, at least, should cater for the IPCC's secondary audiences, though whether the IPCC itself needs to take on this responsibility is debatable. Nevertheless, the interviewees do not believe that the IPCC is currently effectively catering for its secondary audiences. One interviewee puts it as follows: *''I think they are still too much caught in the idea that if the science gets out, they will get it, while that is not going to work. You really have to think through what the target audience is, what sort of information they will need.''*

The IPCC's main channel of communication, the assessment reports, is seen as technical and complex. If one does not have access to someone with an academic background who is able to digest the reports, the reports are left for what they are. However, the majority is concerned that if the IPCC distils its assessment reports, they would become too political by having an advocacy message. Nevertheless, two interviewees argue that the IPCC should not use complicated, unknown words at all.

In relation to the messages the IPCC is conveying in its assessment reports, the interviewees find it useful to get an easy understanding of what changed since the previous report. A few interviewees argue that the IPCC should not produce assessment reports every six or seven years anymore, since the science not markedly changes. Rather, the scientists should use their scarce time to produce reports on particular issues, which would make the IPCC more responsive to what is going on in the science and world.

Services around the publication of the assessment reports are highly valued, but services outside this publication cycle are generally not assessed positively. Having a point of contact to which all the people can go to with their queries is a solution that was put forward. The usability of the website is assessed differently among the interviewees. Nevertheless, they all agree that the IPCC is not effectively reaching out to the general public. The solution to that would be improving their online presence, by proactively engaging with social media and video content.

The language in the assessment reports of the IPCC could be framed more effectively, for example a few interviewees suggest using the language of risk rather than language around uncertainties. Moreover, half of the interviewees mention that giving meaning to the data is essential when it concerns the general public. A few interviewees find that the IPCC is underutilizing the human factor, especially considering the fact that they are under attack from professional communicators working with the climate hub saying they are a faceless body. Two interviewees say that it should tell the human story behind the science, since the IPCC misses a story that engages, excites, and inspires people.

There is consensus among the interviewees that using scientists as messengers of the IPCC's story is generally a good idea. However, not every IPCC scientists is effective, as some are brilliant speakers and some are not. A few interviewees mention that the IPCC should select the scientists that are talented to follow media trainings and motivated to communicate the story to the outer world.

How the IPCC assesses the effectiveness of its communications was specifically discussed by two interviewees, who argue that the IPCC needs to test all its materials on all its audiences. One of them argues: *''I don't think they ever put any of their materials in front of their primary audience and ask them whether this is what they need and where they need it and whether it is said in ways they understand. Nothing. So there's something fundamentally problematic there.''*

However, some interviewees find that the IPCC is already getting better at that, as some interviewees find that its communications have improved over the years.

Together, the interviewees determine three crucial contextual factors to take into account in the design of IPCC's communications. First of all, the IPCC operates in a world which changes rapidly through the media. Hence, it needs to be on the front foot with that, in order to avoid being attacked in the media. Second, the IPCC operates in a politicized context in which it has to deal with climate sceptics, who argue the IPCC is a conspiracy. One solution to losing the secretive reputation is increasing the IPCC's transparency by having an open drafting and editing process. Lastly, all the areas the interviewees say the IPCC's communications need to improve on require more resources. Everyone agrees that the IPCC has limited resources, of whom half of the interviewees argue that the IPCC needs more resources for its communication, in order to cater effectively for its secondary audiences.

CONCLUSION

In its communication strategy, the IPCC has expressed its intention to make its communications audience-appropriate. Audience-appropriate communications require effective inquiry of the needs of the audience. From the perspective of the interviewed key communicators, it appeared that the IPCC has significant areas to improve on, as their current communications reflect an outdated model of how science needs to be communicated. One needs to bear in mind that all the interviewees are from the UK, however, it is expected that the findings echoe voices of the Anglosphere. If the IPCC takes the wishes of its audiences at heart and rethinks its communications, it will likely catalyse a more proportionate political and public response to climate change. Effective communication of the IPCC's findings will benefit the whole climate change community.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The relevance of the IPCC could be considerably increased if it is open to reorienting and restructuring. The research produced a series of recommendations, all with a varying ease of implementation:

1. Produce science on demand

2. Increase transparency

3. Mind the language

4. Work with a large and disparate range of partners

5. Build one strong identity

6. Create divergent points of contact

7. Embrace video content and social media

8. Train scientists who are talented and motivated

9. Engage with the media proactively

10. Test everything

11. Increase resources for communications

SCIENTIFIC & SOCIETAL CONTRIBUTION

The research has been groundbreaking in many aspects, since it has never been explored before what the IPCC's wider audiences needs are with respect to communication. Dr Adam Corner and Christel van Eck[8] published a report on the basis of the research. The report received attention of prominent members of the IPCC itself, popular news outlets such as the Guardian[9], and several academics[10,11,12,13] who built their research on the findings.

ROLE OF THE STUDENT

Christel van Eck was an undergraduate student interning at the Climate Outreach & Information Network (COIN), in Oxford. Together with Dr Adam Corner of COIN and Cardiff University, she developed the idea to investigate the IPCC's communications. The design of the exploratory research, the processing of the results as well as the formulation of conclusions and the writing were done by the student. The internship was part of her study at the Windesheim Honours College (WHC).

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I thank Dr Adam Corner, who has supported me throughout my research with his knowledge and patience whilst allowing me the room to work in my own way. I would like to express my special thanks and gratitude to my internship counsellor of WHC, Maria Garcia-Alvarez, who provided me with feedback and answered all the questions I had throughout the writing process. It is a pleasure to thank those who made this research possible by participating in the interviews.

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